HR State of Washington
Employee Assistance Program

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A newsletter from the Employee Assistance Program

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Q. My employee does not drink on the job, but I feel certain this person is suffering from a hangover a couple times a month. I cannot say that job performance is affected, but there must be something I can do to intervene formally. What approach should I use?

A. Talk to the EAP first. Because you are having difficulty identifying performance issues associated with what appears to be a hangover, a consult is warranted. A confidential discussion with the EA professional will make it easier to develop a plan or approach that includes specific performance issues you could be overlooking. The goal is to help you make an effective supervisor referral based on identifiable performance issues rather than feeling. People experiencing hangovers do not function at optimal levels. Some behaviors are obvious while others will be more subtle. Symptoms of hangovers can create cognitive and psychomotor dysfunction much like intoxication. Identifying such workplace behavior may be a safety issue as much as a productivity concern.

Q. Is there any new research about exercise and stress to help employees who are survivors of a layoff? Some of my employees have recently formed an exercise support group. They're toning up and some have lost weight. I am encouraged with their improved morale.

A. Research exploring the effects of stress related to recession and layoffs is being released continually. In March 2010, researchers from the University of Rochester Medical Center announced findings from a study of 2,800 employees who were survivors of layoffs. The report showed that chronic stress is strongly associated with an increase in being overweight or obese. Healthy dieting did virtually nothing to help change these conditions.

Instead, the key to reducing weight—directly attributable to stress—was exercise. The results of this study strongly suggest that chronic stress, especially for sedentary workers, contributes to weight gain, and that exercise is an essential part of an effective stress-reduction program. *(Source: www.urmc.rochester.edu, Search: Rochester Study Connects Workplace Turmoil, Stress and Obesity, March 24, 2010)*

Q. I think social media Web sites like Facebook are consuming time and hampering the productivity of one of my employees. In spite of our policy, one of my employees can't stay away from these Web sites, even after I insist. Is this a real addiction?

A. Washington State employees need to be mindful about use of state resources. Visiting social websites such as Facebook on State time can be viewed as inappropriate use and an ethical violation when not used to conduct official state business. Meet with your employee, reinforce the seriousness of the employee's behavior, and review with them your agency policy and the Ethics rules.

EAP can also help. Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), although not recognized as an official disorder by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, can be treatable. Make a supervisor referral to the EAP and we will provide an assessment and appropriate referral that will provide support, follow-up, and a program of recovery to help maintain abstinence from compulsive internet use.

Q. When I confronted an employee on a specific matter, the employee glared at me and said, "You know, I am *really* about to get into someone's face!" and then stormed off. This employee often has a hostile tone, but my supervisor and I debated whether this was a threat. What do you think?

A. There is an old saying: "The meaning of your communication is the response that you get." In this instance, at least one of you perceived the statement as a threat. Most employees know they cannot openly make threats at work. What you may be witnessing is belligerence cloaked with an offhand, cryptic expression or *veiled threat*. You do not need to split hairs and debate the precise meaning of the statement. This statement represented inappropriate workplace communication. Feeling threatened is enough to confront and correct such behavior. Your employee may have issues with boundaries, anger management, self-control, and respect. Inappropriate, uncivil communication tends to get worse if not addressed. Eventually, such ignored behavior can seriously impact staff morale and productivity.

Q. We have a very diverse workplace, and I sometimes correct employees when I see them demonstrating poor tolerance of co-workers' differences. I am not an expert on tolerance and bias, so can you offer some language, tips, or "phrases" helpful in educating employees?

A. Education does help alter bias, but the bottom line is that employee behavior must conform to what is civil and supportive of your agency's work goals. Let employees know that the goal of tolerance is a respectful workplace and that without it, the interests of the agency are not served. When correcting employee behavior in the context of supervisory meetings, your goal should be to educate, not counsel or investigate the psychological influences of employee bias. Given that, the following key tolerance principles can help your discussions be more effective. 1) Look past differences of opinion, orientation, ethnic, or racial backgrounds. Instead, focus on understanding a colleague's views and perspective. 2) Avoid the trap of tuning out simply because someone talks or looks differently. 3) Avoid labels. Monitor your speech patterns—and thinking style—to check whether you label others. 4) If you disagree with or don't understand someone's views, react with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Ask at least one earnest, non-threatening question to dig for more information. Be willing to change your mind, withhold judgment and expand your frame of reference. 5) Speak up when hurtful comments are overheard. 6) Reject intolerance when you see it demonstrated.

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